

# GUARDLIFE


JANUARY - JUNE 2025





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Above: Twelve U.S. Army Soldiers with the 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, were awarded the Purple Heart in a ceremony at the National Guard Armory in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, May 17, 2025. The Soldiers received the awards for wounds received while deployed to Syria in 2024 in support of Operation Inherent Resolve. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Michael Schwenk)

Cover: U.S. Army 1st Sgt. Timothy Witts, a crew chief with 1st Battalion, 150th Assault Helicopter Regiment, New Jersey Army National Guard, observes as the helicopter bucket is used to extinguish flames from a UH-60M Black Hawk in Ocean County, New Jersey, April 28, 2025. New Jersey National Guard Soldiers, Airmen, and state civil servants have responded to requests to support ongoing efforts to contain the 15,000-acre Ocean County wildfire. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Michael Schwenk)

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# READINESS IN ACTION

By Brig. Gen. Yvonne L. Mays  
The Adjutant General of New Jersey



U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Yvonne L. Mays, The Adjutant General of New Jersey, right; and New Jersey Gov. Philip D. Murphy, second from right, receive the national and state flags from Col. Brian J. Stramaglia, commander, second from left, and Command Sgt. Maj. Kevin P. Kirkpatrick, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, during the 44th IBCT's Welcome Home

Ceremony at the Jersey Mike's Arena, Piscataway, New Jersey, April 12, 2025. More than 1,500 44th IBCT Soldiers deployed to Iraq, Kuwait, and Syria in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, the largest deployment of NJARNG Soldiers since 2008. (New Jersey National Guard photo by Mark C. Olsen)

As we close the first half of 2025, one theme stands out clearly: Readiness in action. Not readiness as a concept, but readiness proven through deployments, emergency response, training, and leadership development.

This year marked a significant milestone with the return ceremony of more than 1,500 Soldiers from the 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, the largest deployment of New Jersey Army National Guard personnel since 2008. Their mission in Iraq, Kuwait, and Syria in support of Operation Inherent Resolve demanded professionalism, resilience, and adaptability. Welcoming these Soldiers home alongside their families was a powerful reminder of the commitment required to serve and the strength of the communities that support them.

At the same time, our force remained fully engaged here at home. When wildfires threatened Ocean County, New Jersey Army National Guard aviation and ground forces

responded rapidly in coordination with state and local partners. From aerial firefighting operations to sustained support on the ground, our service members demonstrated the flexibility and discipline that make the National Guard a critical asset to the state.

## THE NEW JERSEY NATIONAL GUARD REMAINS PREPARED TO MEET ITS RESPONSIBILITIES AT HOME, ABROAD, AND WHEREVER THE MISSION REQUIRES.

Training and modernization continued across the force. Officer Candidates trained alongside partners from Albania and Kosovo, strengthening leadership skills and international partnerships. Airmen pushed their

limits in demanding environments, sharpening skills required for today's evolving security landscape. Units across New Jersey tested readiness through exercises that challenged command, control, sustainment, and resilience in contested environments.

Equally important are the individual accomplishments that reflect the character of this force. From Soldiers and Airmen earning national level awards, and competitors excelling in marksmanship and Best Warrior competitions, our people continue to not only meet but exceed the standard. These achievements are not isolated successes. They are the result of consistent training, strong leadership, and a culture that values excellence.

As we move into the second half of the year, the momentum built from January through June provides a strong foundation. The New Jersey National Guard remains prepared to meet its responsibilities at home, abroad, and wherever the mission requires.



# Cooper takes the plunge

By Senior Airman Darion Boyd, 177th Fighter Wing Public Affairs Office

Seventy U.S. Air Force Airmen from across the United States graduated from the Air National Guard’s Cold Weather Operations Course at Camp Ripley Training Center, Minnesota, Feb. 8, 2025.

U.S. Air Force Col. Brian T. Cooper, commander, 177th Fighter Wing Maintenance Group, New Jersey Air National Guard, was among the graduates.

“I was personally invited to attend CWOC by the course’s Senior Enlisted Leader, Chief Master Sgt. Casey Erickson,” said Cooper. “The course had never had a colonel attend, and he thought I would be a good candidate to provide senior leader perspective and feedback, if I was able to graduate. I felt very honored to be able to represent my state, the Jersey Devils, and the field grade officer corps at the course; and was even more proud to be the first colonel to graduate.”

The course consisted of a six-day, five-night outdoor field training exercise, Jan. 27 to Feb. 8, where Airmen were expected to operate in the snow in subzero temperatures.

“CWOC definitely ranks up there as one of the most demanding courses,” said Cooper. “Every day was a gut check for me.”

CWOC’s purpose is to train Airmen in arctic weather essential military skills. Airmen performed extreme weather land-navigation; built improvised shelters; practiced camouflage and concealment and

executed winter fighting position and movement techniques. Airmen also performed cold-water immersion and cold-weather injury identification and treatment. For each activity, students were required to exercise risk management in an extreme environment with day-to-day challenges.

“Extreme cold weather makes everything more difficult, even the most mundane tasks,” said Cooper. “We carried a 75-pound rucksack while pulling a 350-pound sled over 40 miles through the snow – not only just surviving, but learning to excel, in subzero temperatures.”

When trainees were issued their Extended Cold Weather Clothing System, they were instructed to remove the rank insignias from their uniforms for the remainder of the course.

“This was the first time in a very long time that I was able to break away from the formalities of being a colonel and just be another humble trainee in the field,” said Cooper. “I was accountable

utterly to my team and myself; I had to earn everything.”

The 177th Fighter Wing is dedicated to maintaining readiness and providing dominant air power whenever and wherever needed.

“If the mission requires us to fight in the Arctic; we must all be ready to brawl and winning is non-negotiable,” said Cooper. “Without question, CWOC is preparing our Airmen to be ready for that combat environment.”

***“This was the first time in a very long time that I was able to break away from the formalities of being a colonel...I was accountable utterly to my team and myself”***  
**COL. BRIAN T. COOPER**  
**COMMANDER, 177TH FIGHTER WING MAINTENANCE GROUP**



U.S. Air Force Col. Brian Cooper, commander, 177th Fighter Wing Maintenance Group, participates in a cold-water submersion exercise during the Air National Guard's Cold Weather Operations Course at Camp Ripley Training Center, Minnesota, Feb. 7, 2025. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Audra Flanagan)

# CST TRAINS IN SALEM

PHOTOS BY MARK C. OLSEN  
NEW JERSEY NATIONAL GUARD PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Eric J. Boyer, a survey team member with the New Jersey National Guard's 21st Weapons of Mass Destruction-Civil Support Team, employs radiation and chemical detection equipment before entering a simulated crime scene during a training exercise at the Salem County Fire Academy in Woodstown, New Jersey, March 18, 2025. The 21st WMD-CST identifies chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear substances; assess and advises civil authorities on response measures to man-made or natural disasters.





Above: U.S. Air Force Capt. John Ewasko, survey team leader, left, assists survey team member U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Eric J. Boyer, both with the 21st Weapons of Mass Destruction-Civil Support Team, in donning his Level B Protective Suit.

Below: U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Alex J. Potts, a survey team member with the 21st WMD-CST, photographs a simulated crime scene during a training exercise at the Salem County Fire Academy in Woodstown, New Jersey, March 18, 2025



Above: Survey team member U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Alex J. Potts uses a handheld chemical identification system during a training exercise at the Salem County Fire Academy in Woodstown, New Jersey, March 18, 2025.

Below: U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Eric J. Boyer, 21st WMD-CST, is decontaminated by members of the Salem County Sheriff's Office Hazmat Response Team and the Salem County Emergency Services Spill Response Unit during a training exercise.





# Fralick selected as one of top recruiters

By Mark C. Olsen, New Jersey National Guard Public Affairs Office

U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Brittany Fralick, a production recruiter with the 108th Wing, New Jersey Air National Guard, was named as one of the Air Force’s top 13 recruiters at the Air Force Recruiting Service’s annual Operation Blue Suit ceremony in New Braunfels, Texas, March 27, 2025.

“It feels incredibly humbling and rewarding to be recognized and be able to represent the New Jersey Air National Guard,” said Fralick. “Getting this award is not just a personal achievement but a reflection of the hard work, dedication and support from my team, leadership, and especially my husband and children.”

During the ceremony, Fralick was presented the Operation Blue Suit Award by Brig. Gen. Christopher R. Amrhein, commander, Air Force Accessions Center and Air Force Recruiting Service. The award is presented to recruiters who not only surpass all goals, but also showcases outstanding development by making a direct impact on end strength mission.

The ceremony was an opportunity to celebrate their outstanding achievements and publicly thank them for their contribution to Air Force recruiting.

“Success to me is helping people feel like they have a purpose, realize their potential, and giving them different opportunities to set them up for a great future,” said Fralick.

This year’s honorees represent the best in Total Force recruiting and have set a high standard for future generations of Air Force recruiters to follow. This is the fifth year Air Force Recruiting Services is recognizing its Total Force partners by honoring Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve recruiters.

“Every day is a new person with a new story. Whether it’s visiting High Schools, Colleges, Career Fairs, hosting informational events or meeting one on one in the office,” said Fralick. “Engaging with people and not just talking casually but getting to know them, their strengths, weaknesses, goals, and aspirations is what drives my passion as a recruiter.”

The Operation Blue Suit Program was initiated in 1979 to stimulate production in critical Air Force recruiting programs during the traditional crunch months of February through May and has been expanded over the years. The program recognizes the best recruiters worldwide for their efforts who make a direct impact to fill career fields critical to the Air Force in accomplishing its missions.

Fralick remembered her recruiter – Senior Master Sgt. Tamika Covington – and how she ensured that Fralick knew exactly what her path would be.

“I thought of 17-year-old me not knowing what the future held, but joining the New Jersey Air National Guard would benefit me in so many ways as I would also benefit them,” said Fralick.

Prior to becoming a recruiter, Fralick served in the New Jersey Air National Guard’s 177th Fighter Wing’s Force Support Squadron. During that time, she worked closely with the 177th recruiters. It was at that point Fralick decided her future lie in recruiting.

“I wanted to be that guide that I had when making one of the biggest decisions of my life,” said Fralick. “I wanted to be the person to get in the community and show what we have to offer and introduce this path as an option. The New Jersey Air National Guard has given me so many valuable skills, a sense of purpose and pride in serving my state and country and I love passing my



U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Brittany Fralick, production recruiter, 108th Wing, New Jersey Air National Guard, center, is presented the Operation Blue Suit Award by Brig. Gen. Christopher R. Amrhein, commander, Air Force Accessions Center and Air Force Recruiting Service left, and Chief Master Sergeant. Rebecca A. C. Arbona, Command Chief Master Sergeant, AFAC, during the Operation Blue Suit banquet in New Braunfels, Texas, March 27, 2025. (Courtesy photo)

experiences, knowledge, and guidance to others.”

Fralick’s approach to recruiting is centered around authenticity, relationship-building, and understanding her applicants’ wants and needs that will help them achieve their goals. This is done by getting to know their background and being able to show them how the Air National Guard can be beneficial to them while also making a meaningful impact to the people around them.

“Having the ability to positively impact someone’s future and contribute to the strength of our force is the best of both worlds,” said Fralick. “Success to me is helping people feel like they have a purpose, realize their potential and giving them different opportunities to set them up for a great future.”



U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Brittany Fralick, center, is honored with a sabre salute during the Operation Blue Suit banquet. (Courtesy photo)

# DAF selects Todman as 2024 Athlete of the Year

By Debbie Aragon, Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center Public Affairs

The U.S. Air Force has named a New Jersey Air National Guardsman its 2024 Female Athlete of the Year.

Todman, a services journeyman with the 177th Force Support Squadron, 177th Fighter Wing, Atlantic City Air National Guard Base, New Jersey, is a powerlifter who competes nationally and internationally in the 76-kilogram weight class.

The Athlete of the Year Board at the Air Force Services Center evaluated more than 20 packages, looking for achievements, leadership, discipline and resiliency before deciding on the winning entries, said Tech. Sgt. Tamra Villanueva, DAF Sports manager and board facilitator at AFSVC.

In March 2024, she competed at the U.S. Virgin Islands Powerlifting Nationals across many events. She won first place in classic bench and equipped bench events, captured second place overall in the open 76-kg category, and earned the titles of 76kg Equipped National Champion and Best Lifter.

During the International Powerlifting Federation Bench Press World Championship in May, Todman again showcased her equipped bench press strength, winning 5th place overall to solidify her position on the global circuit.

At the International Powerlifting Federation Open World Championship in November, she again showed her strength on the world stage in the deadlift event when she ranked 6th place overall, becoming the first female athlete to rank in the top 10 globally in multiple sports.

In addition to her personal achievements, Todman served as a dedicated powerlifting coach and handler for the North American Powerlifting Championships, representing the U.S. Virgin Islands, where she guided men and women to success in various weight classes, including first place overall in the master’s class for a world record. She also coached USA Track and Field open and master athletes to outstanding finishes in the New Jersey and New York Open and Masters Track and Field Championship.

To encourage sports in her local community and raise awareness of a developmental disorder, Todman organized

the 2024 World Autism Day Race on Kindness. The event drew 250 participants for a one-mile and 5-kilometer run and raised more than \$2,500 for a local school that specializes in supporting children with autism.

At the 177th, Todman was awarded a Meritorious Service Medal for her contributions to the wing fitness program when her work with the program led to a 35 percent reduction in physical fitness test failures over a three-year period.

For Todman, her biggest motivators are her faith, her family, and her failures.

“My failures have motivated me because I’ve learned they weren’t fatal.”

MASTER SGT. DANIELLE TODMAN  
SERVICES JOURNEYMAN  
177TH FORCE SUPPORT SQUADRON

“My faith and family have kept me grounded so I could root and grow. Their fruits are the words that have refined me to be not just a better athlete, but a better woman,” she said. “My failures have motivated me because I’ve learned they weren’t fatal. They were lessons that opened my heart and eyes to be more receptive

to the things I needed to be my blessed and best for myself and others.”

During the award period, Todman’s achievements were evident at all levels said Villanueva.

“As an athlete of an individual sport, it’s important to note that although she was supported by friends, family, and colleagues, it was her discipline and hard work that got her on those podiums,” said Villanueva. “Her dedication to coaching, not only in her sport but other athletic disciplines, also helped her earn athlete of the year honors.”



U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Danielle Todman, 177th Force Support Squadron Services Flight base fitness manager, competes in a powerlifting competition June 9, 2022, in Sun City, South Africa. Todman competed in the International Powerlifting Federation World Classic Powerlifting Championships. (Courtesy Photo)



# M240 training



A U.S. Army Soldier with the 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, along with Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserve Soldiers conduct live-fire battle drills with the M240B machine gun during the 1-254th Regional Training Institute, NJARNG's Infantry Advanced Leaders Course at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, April 10, 2025. ALC is a branch-specific course that provides Soldiers selected for promotion to staff sergeant the opportunity to enhance their leadership, tactical expertise, and technical skills needed to lead squad-size units. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Michael Schwenk)



# WELCOME HOME



U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Kevin P. Kirkpatrick, left, and Col. Brian J. Stramaglia, commander, right, uncased the 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, colors during the 44th IBCT's Welcome Home Ceremony at the Jersey Mike's Arena, Piscataway, New Jersey, April 12, 2025. More than 1,500 44th IBCT Soldiers deployed to Iraq, Kuwait, and Syria in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, the largest deployment of NJARNG Soldiers since 2008. (New Jersey National Guard photo by Mark C. Olsen)



# OCS CANDIDATES TRAIN WITH ALBANIAN, AND KOSOVAR CADETS

PHOTOS AND STORY BY CAPT. KYLE MARR, JOINT FORCE HEADQUARTERS - ARMY PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE

For the fourth consecutive year, officer candidates from the New Jersey and New York Army National Guard traveled to Albania to conduct a field training exercise with cadets from the Albanian Military Academy.

This FTX is part of the New Jersey National Guard’s long-standing participation in the Department of Defense’s State Partnership Program with the Albanian Armed Forces. From April 19 to April 30, 2025, officer candidates and cadets put their tactical and leadership skills to the test while leading mixed squads composed of U.S. peers and cadets from Albania and Kosovo. This year’s event also featured collaboration with cadre from the Colorado and Connecticut National Guards, further strengthening inter-state and international ties.

Upon arrival in Albania, OCS candidates spent several days leading their squads through Situational Tactical Exercise “lanes.” These lanes included movement to contact, knocking out a bunker, squad attacks, conducting ambushes, reacting to ambushes, and reconnaissance missions. The varied challenges are designed and evaluated by OCS cadre to sharpen candidates’ decision-making skills under pressure and build battle-drill proficiency.

Albanian Armed Forces leadership emphasized the importance of integrating cadets into mixed squads to promote effective

communication and leadership in dynamic environments.

“All of the participants in this exercise learned from each other and it’s important to continue to build on the progress we made here,” said Maj. Besnik Tusha, Head of Tactics at the Albanian Armed Forces Academy. “Planning and executing this training mission with our American counterparts is a great opportunity to strengthen our relationship.”

Beyond tactical exercises, candidates and cadets participated in cultural visits to the cities of Berat and Durres, exploring historical landmarks such as the Durres Amphitheater and the Berat Castle. These cultural exchanges provided additional bonding opportunities that enriched the training experience.

For many U.S. Officer Candidates, this marked the first opportunity to apply classroom instruction in a realistic, multinational field environment. “At first the language barrier seemed to be an obstacle,” said Officer Candidate James Kemp of New Jersey Army National Guard’s OCS Class 68, “but it ultimately helped with dissemination in the field by having to give clear tasks.”

The success of the 2025 training iteration underscores the enduring value of the State Partnership Program and its role in preparing future leaders for the demands of multinational cooperation.

**“Planning and executing this training mission with our American counterparts is a great opportunity to strengthen our relationship.”**

**MAJ. BESNIK TUSHA  
HEAD OF TACTICAL GROUP  
ALBANIAN ARMED FORCES ACADEMY**



New Jersey and New York Officer Candidates conduct Situational Tactical Exercise lanes with cadets from Albania and Kosovo. The New Jersey National Guard and Albania have been partners for more 20 years in the U.S. Department of Defense State Partnership Program.

“Training events like this are great for strengthening our relationship with our Albanian partners,” said Maj. Pedro Zamora, commander, NJARNG OCS. “This year was unique with the addition of Kosovo’s participation and our

collaboration with OCS cadre from New York, Connecticut, and Colorado National Guard. It’s exciting to see the expansion of this exercise year to year and I would love to see it continue.”





***ALWAYS READY, ALWAYS THERE***

**PHOTOS BY SGT. MICHAEL SCHWENK  
NEW JERSEY NATIONAL GUARD PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE**



*A U.S. Army UH-60M Black Hawk helicopter with the 1st Battalion, 150th Assault Helicopter Regiment, New Jersey Army National Guard, uses a helicopter bucket to extinguish wildfire in Ocean County, New Jersey, April 28, 2025. New Jersey National Guard Soldiers, Airmen, and state civil servants have responded to requests to support ongoing efforts to contain the 15,000-acre wildfire in Ocean County, New Jersey.*



*Above: A NJARNG UH-60M Black Hawk helicopter fills a helicopter bucket to fight the Ocean County wildfires April 24, 2024.*

*Below: U.S. Army 1st Sgt. Timothy Witts, a crew chief with the 1st Battalion, 150th Assault Helicopter Regiment, monitors filling a water bucket April 28, 2025.*

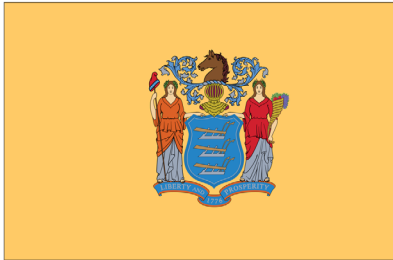




# NJNG HOSTS CYPRIOT CHIEF OF THE NATIONAL GUARD



*Lt. Gen. Georgios Tsitsikostas, Chief of the National Guard, Republic of Cyprus, left, speaks with U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Yvonne L. Mays, The Adjutant General of New Jersey, at the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, May 2, 2025. Tsitsikostas and senior Cypriot National Guard staff members met with NJNG Army, Air and Joint Staff senior leaders May 1-4, 2025. The visit comprised meetings at multiple locations including New Jersey’s Regional Operations & Intelligence Center in Ewing Township; the battleship USS New Jersey in Camden; the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs in Lawrenceville; the 108th Wing at Joint Base McGuire-Dix Lakehurst, and the 177th Fighter Wing at the Atlantic City Air National Guard Base. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Derek Vasquez)*



**STATE PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM  
REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS AND NEW JERSEY**



*Above: Lt. Gen. Georgios Tsitsikostas, Chief of the National Guard, Republic of Cyprus, right, speaks with an F-16 Fighting Falcon pilot at the 177th Fighter Wing, New Jersey Air National Guard, Atlantic City Air National Guard Base, New Jersey, May 3, 2025.*  
*Below: Lt. Gen. Georgios Tsitsikostas, right, gives the thumbs up to Sgt. 1st Class James K. Bolek, UH-60M Black Hawk crew chief with the 1st Battalion, 150th Assault Helicopter Regiment, New Jersey Army National Guard, at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, May 4, 2025. (U.S. Army National Guard photos by Sgt. Michael Hayes)*





# THE ROAD TO BEST WARRIOR



U.S. Army Sgt. Kristopher Piwowarczyk, 104th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, competes in the obstacle course event during the New Jersey Army National Guard's Best Warrior Competition at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, April 29, 2025. Six Soldiers and five noncommissioned officers, along with four soldiers from the Republic of Albania and the Republic of

Cyprus – New Jersey's State Partnership Program partners – will compete April 29-May 2, 2025. The top Soldier and NCO will go on to challenge seven other states' winners at the Region I Best Warrior Competition at the New Hampshire National Guard Army Pembroke Regional Training Institute, Pembroke, New Hampshire, May 19-23, 2025. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Seth Cohen)



Above: U.S. Army Spc. Yadriel Paulino-Osorio, 2nd Battalion, 113th Infantry Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, left, and U.S. Army Spc. Daniel F. Nelson, 3rd Battalion, 112th Field Artillery Regiment, 44th IBCT, right, compete in the obstacle course event during the NJARNG's Best Warrior Competition, April 29, 2025.

Below: U.S. Army Sgt. Tara L. Vera, 902nd Quartermaster Company, 42nd Regional Support Group, competes in the obstacle course event during the NJARNG's Best Warrior Competition, April 29, 2025. (U.S. Army National Guard photos by Sgt. Derek Vasquez)







Above: U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Taulant Halilaj, Observer Coach/Trainer Operations Group, NJARNG, center, reviews the M4 carbine's sights with Cpl. Eran Zagani, left, and Lance Cpl. Join Mino, both with the Albanian Army, Republic of Albania, during the NJARNG's Best Warrior Competition, April 30, 2025. (New Jersey National Guard photo by Mark C. Olsen)

Below: U.S. Army Spc. Curtis E. Wheatley, 2nd Battalion, 113th Infantry Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, fires an M17 pistol during the stress shoot/warrior tasks portion of the NJARNG's Best Warrior Competition, May 1, 2025. (New Jersey Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Francis De Leon)



Above: Master Sgt. Michalis Michail, Cyprus National Guard, Republic of Cyprus, fires an M17 pistol during the competition's stress shoot/warrior tasks portion, May 1, 2025. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Derek Vasquez)

U.S. Army Sgt. Sebastian E. Fara, 3rd Battalion, 112th Field Artillery Regiment, 44th IBCT, conducts a radio check during the stress shoot/warrior tasks portion, May 1, 2025. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Michael Schwenk)







**Above:** Republic of Albania Cpl. Eran Zagani, Albanian Armed Forces, carries ammunition containers during the stress shoot/warrior tasks portion of the New Jersey Army National Guard's Best Warrior Competition, May 1, 2025. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Michael Schwenk)

**Below:** Master Sgt. Michalis Michail, Cyprus National Guard, Republic of Cyprus, left; Spc. Curtis E. Wheatley, 2nd Battalion, 113th Infantry Regiment, 44th IBC, center, and Lance Cpl. Join Mino, Albanian Armed Forces, Republic of Albania, compete in the 12-mile ruck march, May 2, 2025. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Michael Hayes)



# 227TH ASOS CASES ITS COLORS

*By Airman 1st Class Andrew Relyea, 177th Fighter Wing Public Affairs Office*

The 227th Air Support Operations Squadron participated in a Casing of the Colors ceremony for their transition to the 108th Wing at the 177th Fighter Wing, Atlantic City Air National Guard Base, New Jersey, May 4, 2025.

The Casing of the Colors is a ceremonial farewell marking the transition of a unit, be it inactivation, relocation, or deployment.

"The 227th has stood at a pillar of tactical excellence," said Col. Benjamin Robbins, 177th Fighter Wing, commander. "The 227th Air Support Operation Squadron, a unit whose legacy is written not only in its language, but in the lives it touched, the missions it supported, and the warriors it trained."

The 227th ASOS has been in operation for more than 10 years at the 177th, with more than 20 of the unit's Joint Terminal Attack Controllers serving in the global war on terrorism, on every continent on earth except Antarctica and Australia.

The 227th transitioned to the 108th Wing as the 227th Cyber Operations Squadron, April 1, 2025.

Members of the 227th ASOS, also known as 'Berserkers', have a few options. They could test for the cyber field and be transferred over to the 227th COS, transfer to a different Air Force Specialty Code, or retire from their military service. With the help of the 177th FW, members had until April 1st to pick which option they wanted.

"Each and every Berserker has exhibited maturity, decision making and mental and physical endurance necessary to meet any challenges you are presented with," said U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Daniel Roske, commander of the 227th ASOS. "As you start your new careers outside the 227th ASOS, do so with your head held up high."

The ceremony was held in conjunction with a Bronze Star Medal award ceremony for Staff Sgt. Justin Kahill, 227th JTAC, for his meritorious service while deployed to United States Central Command.

Roske expressed his thankfulness for the support, from the



**U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Daniel Roske, 227th Air Support Operations Squadron, commander, center, and Chief Master Sgt. Patrick Donohoe, 227th ASOS superintendent, right, fold the flag while Master Sgt. Victor Petrilli, 227th ASOS first sergeant, holds the guidon during a casing of the colors and Bronze Star Medal award ceremony at the 177th Fighter Wing, Atlantic City Air National Guard Base, New Jersey, May 4, 2025. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Airman Connor Taggart)**

Wing and the New Jersey National Guard Joint Force Headquarters, during this historic transition.

"While the 227th ASOS may close its doors, the memories, bonds, and legacy we built will never fade," said Roske. "No matter where the mission takes us next, the Berserker spirit lives on in each of us."





# Kahill awarded Bronze Star

By Airman 1st Class Andrew Relyea, 177th Fighter Wing Public Affairs Office



*U.S. Air Force Col. Benjamin Robbins, commander, 177th Fighter Wing, left, congratulates Staff Sgt. Justin Kahill, 227th Joint Terminal Attack Controller, at the Atlantic City Air National Guard Base, New Jersey, May 4, 2025. The Bronze Star is awarded to service members who distinguish themselves by heroic or meritorious achievement or service in a combat zone. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Airman Connor Taggart)*

U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Justin Kahill, 227th Air Support Operations Squadron, New Jersey Air National Guard, joint terminal attack controller, received a Bronze Star Medal at the Atlantic City Air National Guard Base, New Jersey, May 4, 2025.

The Bronze Star Medal is awarded to United States service members who distinguish themselves by heroic or meritorious achievement or service in a combat zone.

“Staff Sgt. Kahill’s leadership, dedication, and professionalism exemplify Army and Air Force core values, and his actions reflect great credit upon himself,” said Master Sgt. William Reed, first sergeant, 177th Logistics Readiness Squadron.

Kahill was deployed as a JTAC to United States Central Command, from March 30 to Nov. 15, 2024. He was one of two New Jersey Air National Guard JTAC’s to be deployed during this period. It was his first deployment.

His meritorious service helped to complete approximately 30 airdrops over a landing zone, with zero incidents, provided supplies and lifesaving blood, and fortified the landing zone’s capabilities. He provided more than 50 hours of JTAC support for multiple repatriation missions, allowing more than 5,000 displaced persons and approximately 2,000 families to be repatriated to their home country.

He ensured the airspace was clear by reacting quickly to more than 100 intercontinental ballistic missiles launched from Iran. Within his first two weeks of arriving, he requested close air support and ensured that a vehicle that was firing rockets at the landing zone was taken out swiftly.

Kahill served four years of active duty before transferring to the 227th ASOS.

“I was just happy to be able to go over there and accomplish the mission,” said Kahill. “I am glad everyone was able to come home.”

**“Staff Sgt. Kahill’s leadership, dedication, and professionalism exemplify Army and Air Force core values.”**

**MASTER SGT. WILLIAM REED  
FIRST SERGEANT  
177TH LOGISTICS READINESS SQUADRON**

# 108TH WING COMPLETES CRE

By Senior Airman Emily Saxton, 108th Wing Public Affairs Office



The 108th Wing completed a combat readiness exercise at the Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, Alpena, Michigan, May 18, 2025.

This exercise, which ran from May 14-18, tested the New Jersey Air National Guard’s wing’s ability to generate, employ and sustain wartime, contingency, and force sustainment missions in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility and their ability to operate and survive against enemy threats.

“During the wing’s first fly-away CRE in 14 years, our Airmen demonstrated incredible adaptability and teamwork throughout this exercise,” said Col. David Shatts, commander, 108th Wing. “From refining combat readiness to responding under pressure, this training ensures we remain fully prepared for any mission, anywhere in the world.”

"This combat readiness exercise was absolutely critical," said Col. Joseph Leonard, deputy commander, 108th Wing. "It's not just about proving we can respond to any threat, but about refining our processes, sharpening our skills, and ensuring our Airmen are ready to execute in the most challenging environments."

The exercise evaluated the Medical Group, Mission Support Group, and Wing Staff Agencies as they prepare for their Force Generation deployment cycle. The CRE incorporated realistic contested, degraded, and operationally limited scenarios to simulate threats expected during the Great Power Competition. The GPC is when countries like the U.S. and China compete to be the most powerful in military strength, technology and world influence, without going to war.

"This exercise isn't just a test; it's a trial proving our readiness for any contingency," said Lt. Col. Jason Neumann, inspector general, 108th Wing. “It demands we sharpen our skills, trust in our training, and prove our unwavering commitment to mission success, no matter the challenge or location.”

*U.S. Air Force Airmen with the 108th Security Forces Squadron, New Jersey Air National Guard, participate in a combat readiness exercise at the Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, Alpena, Michigan on May 16, 2025. This exercise tested the wing’s ability to generate, employ and sustain wartime, contingency, and force sustainment missions in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility and their ability to operate and survive against enemy threats. (U.S. Air Force photos by Senior Airman Emily Saxton)*





# MEMORIAL DAY



U.S. Army Spc. Valerie Gonzalez, 2nd Battalion, 113th Infantry Regiment, New Jersey Army National Guard, teaches Girl Scouts about the importance of Memorial Day during a Memorial Day celebration at the National Guard Armory in Riverdale, New Jersey, May 7, 2025. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Seth Cohen)



# 12 AWARDED PURPLE HEART

Twelve Soldiers with the 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, were awarded the Purple Heart for injuries received in action while deployed in Syria Aug. 5, 2024, in support of Operation Inherent Resolve during a ceremony at the National Guard Armory in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, May 17, 2025. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Michael Schwenk)

## THE FOLLOWING SOLDIERS WERE AWARDED THE PURPLE HEART

1st Lt. Jayme Henderson  
Sgt. 1st Class Toan Tran  
Staff Sgt. Marc Esty  
Staff Sgt. Daniel Guadalupe  
Staff Sgt. Jake Kim  
Staff Sgt. Victor Oyola  
Sgt. Joy Caulk  
Sgt. Damian Henderson  
Sgt. David Solon  
Spc. Angeliz Sierra-Ortiz  
Spc. Stith Shands  
Spc. Ryan Winthers



# NJNG TAG Marksmanship Match

Photos by Sgt. Michael Schwenk, New Jersey National Guard Public Affairs Office

The 2025 New Jersey National Guard Adjutant General Marksmanship Match was held from May 19-21, 2025.

Thirty-three competitors registered for the TAG Match from New Jersey Army and Air National Guard units. The three-day event tested competitors’ marksmanship skills from short range to long range courses of fire in less-than-ideal conditions. While promoting marksmanship overall, the match looked to find the best shooters to represent New Jersey at the regional and national competitions.

The goal of the state marksmanship program is to continue to promote competitive events and provide institutional training within marksmanship related activities; to improve marksmanship proficiency; increase individual lethality, and advance unit level training programs in the Army and Air National Guard.



## THE WINNERS

***Excellence In Competition: Pistol***

Sgt. 1st Class Joseph R. Garback – 1st Place Combat Pistol,  
2nd Place Rifle Champion, and 2nd Place Grand Champion

Staff Sgt. Taulant Halilaj – 1st Place Reflexive Fire, 3rd Place Grand Champion

Staff Sgt. Cory C. Van Dyke – Grand Champion

***Excellence In Competition: Rifle***

Staff Sgt. Cory C. Van Dyke – 1st Place Rifle Champion

Staff Sgt. Christian A. Klaus – 1st Place Combat Rifle

Staff Sgt. Michael Toro

## THE NJNG STATE MARKSMANSHIP TEAMS

***Alpha Team***

Staff Sgt. Cory C. Van Dyke; Sgt 1st Class Joseph R. Garback;  
Staff Sgt. Taulant Halilaj; Master Sgt. Anthony F. Piscopo-Bann,  
and Sgt. Alexander S. Frazier (A Team alternate)

***Bravo Team***

Sgt. Alexander S. Frazier; Sgt 1st Class Marco G. Fox;  
Staff Sgt. Justin M. Rogowski, and Staff Sgt. Michael Toro

U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Jason Pabon, 1st Battalion, 254th Regiment, New Jersey Army National Guard, left, coaches a competitor during the Adjutant General's Match small arms marksmanship competition at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, May 21, 2025. The State Marksmanship Program organized the TAG Match, which consisted of 33 New Jersey National Guardsmen, with the winners advancing to the National Guard Bureau's Marksmanship Competition later this year.



Above: New Jersey National Guard Soldiers and Airmen fire M4 carbines during the Adjutant General's Match small arms marksmanship competition at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, May 21, 2025.

Below: U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Cory Van Dyke, with 2nd Battalion, 113th Infantry Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, fires the M4 carbine during the Adjutant General's Match small arms marksmanship competition.







*Above: U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Joseph Garback, 1st Battalion, 114th Infantry Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, fires an M4 carbine May 21, 2025.*

*Below: U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Christian Klaus, 1st Battalion, 114th Infantry Regiment, 44th IBCT, fires an M4 carbine during the Adjutant General's Match small arms marksmanship competition.*



*Above: A U.S. Army Soldier, with the New Jersey Army National Guard, fires an M4 carbine at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, May 22, 2025.*

*Below: U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Cory Van Dyke, 2nd Battalion, 113th Infantry Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, left, watches an instructor grade his shot grouping during the Adjutant General's Match small arms marksmanship competition.*





# Piwowarczyk wins Region I BWC

Photo and story by Pfc. Makayla Panzer, 114th Public Affairs Detachment



U.S. Army Sgt. Kristopher Piwowarczyk, right, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 104th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, and Spc. Adam Andrews, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 126th Aviation Regiment, Rhode Island Army National Guard, left, were awarded Noncommissioned Officer and Soldier of the Year, by State Command Sgt. Maj. William Ferland, New Hampshire Army National Guard, for earning first place in the Region I Army National Guard Best Warrior Competition, May 23, 2025, at the Edward Cross Training Complex in Pembroke, New Hampshire.

U.S. Army Sgt. Kristopher Piwowarczyk of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 104th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, NJARNG, won Noncommissioned Officer of the Year at the Army National Guard Region 1 Best Warrior Competition hosted by New Hampshire from May 20 to 23, 2025.

Besting a field of competitors from Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont, Piwowarczyk qualified for the national BWC, scheduled July 11 to 20 in Maryland.

“I wasn’t competing against other competitors,” Piwowarczyk said. “The only thing I was up against was myself. I asked how I could perform at my highest level and learned from past weaknesses and failures.”

Held at various locations across the state, the RBWC kicked off before sunrise May 20 with the expert physical fitness assessment – a grueling event involving long-distance running, sprints, high crawls, weight carries, and body-weight exercises. All competitors successfully completed the seven exercises in under 30 minutes.

With only an hour to recover, competitors changed into their dress uniforms for the board and a written exam. State command sergeants major from across the region evaluated their composure, presentation, military knowledge, and awareness of current events.

“Challenges like this are important,” said NHARNG State Command Sgt. Maj. William Ferland. “It allows senior noncommissioned officers to identify and mentor Soldiers with strong

traits, even when the Soldier doesn’t realize their own potential.”

Later that afternoon, Soldiers toured the SIG SAUER and Wilcox factories for hands-on weapons familiarization, preparing for day two’s marksmanship challenges at the SIG SAUER Academy in Epping.

Competitors fired XM7 rifles and M17 pistols at targets ranging from 50 to 300 meters under tight time constraints. A stress shoot followed. Competitors sprinted 100 meters, quickly loaded their weapons, and engaged targets inside a 270-degree indoor range. This tested their speed, composure, and accuracy under pressure.

Day three began with land navigation deep in the White Mountain National Forest.

Using only a map and compass, Soldiers had four hours to find five points in Crawford Notch, a rugged terrain surrounded by peaks more than 4,000 feet high. None were able to locate all the points in the thick foliage and rainy, 40-degree conditions.

That evening, Soldiers faced a “mystery” hazmat event in Littleton, where they donned and doffed protective masks and suits under a simulated gas threat.

The final day began with a 12-mile ruck march through the rainy backroads of Strafford. Soldiers carried 35-pound packs with no knowledge of the total distance.

Piwowarczyk finished first with a time of 2:05:58.

“Your mind wants to give up first,” he said. “But if you’re mentally strong, you can push past your own limits.”

# DEFENDER 25

PHOTOS BY SGT. MICHAEL HAYES, 444TH MOBILE PUBLIC AFFAIRS DETACHMENT



U.S. Army 1st Sgt. Derek Forbes, Bravo Company, 104th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, left, greets Command Sgt. Maj. Blerim Çera, Albanian Land Forces, during DEFENDER 25 in Zall-Herr, Republic of Albania, May 30, 2025. More than 100 NJARNG Soldiers participated in the largest annual U.S. Army security cooperation exercise in Europe from May 24-June 11, 2025. While in Albania, the 104th Brigade Engineer Battalion and the Observer Coach/Trainer Operations Group, fulfilled their own annual military readiness training requirements, as well as strengthen NATO interoperability

and enhance a nearly 25-year relationship with the Albanian Armed Forces within the State Partnership Program. During DEFENDER 25, the NJARNG participated in Immediate Response 25. This entailed live-fire activities with Albanian Armed Forces, as part of the State Partnership Program enhancing regional cooperation and security. The New Jersey National Guard maintains a long-standing relationship with the Republic of Albania, which began informally in 1995 and officially became part of the U.S. Department of Defense National Guard State Partnership Program, Sept. 21, 2001. It is one of the oldest SPP relationships in the nation.



STATE PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM  
REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA AND NEW JERSEY





*Above: U.S. Army Sgt. Jordan J. Quilca-Chumacero, team leader, 104th Brigade Engineer Battalion, right, conducts explosive training with Albanian Land Force soldiers in Bizë, Albania, June 2, 2025.*

*Below: U.S. Army combat engineers with the 104th Brigade Engineer Battalion and Albanian Land Force soldiers pose for a group photo in Bizë, Albania, June 2, 2025.*



*Above: U.S. Army combat engineers with the 104th Brigade Engineer Battalion participate in simulated buddy fire teams with Albanian Land Force soldiers in Bizë, Albania, June 3, 2025.*

*Below: U.S. Army combat engineers with the 104th Brigade Engineer Battalion, place improvised Bangalore torpedoes to cut concertina wire in Bizë, Albania, June 4, 2025.*







*Above: U.S. Army combat engineers with the 104th Brigade Engineer Battalion, conduct live fire drills in Bizë, Albania, June 4, 2025.*

*Below: A U.S. Army Soldier with the Observer Coach/Trainer Operations Group observes Albanian Armed Forces Light Infantry conduct live mortar fire training in Bizë, Albania, June 5, 2025.*



*Above: U.S. Army Soldiers with the Observer Coach/Trainer Operations Group observe Albanian Armed Forces Light Infantry and Kosovo Security Forces conduct live mortar fire training in Bizë, Albania, June 5, 2025.*

*Below: U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Taulant Halilaj, Observer Coach/Trainer Operations Group, left, observes Albanian Armed Forces Light Infantry and Kosovo Security Forces conduct live mortar fire training in Bizë, Albania, June 5, 2025.*





# LAST ROUNDS



U.S. Army combat engineers with the 104th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, zero their M4 carbines and shoot on a known-distance range during DEFENDER 25 in Bizë, Albania, June 2, 2025. (U.S. Army National Guard Photo by Sgt. Michael Hayes)